Why Do We Go Fishing?

This newsletter article is adapted from the first chapter of "Be at Leisure," a book about Lutheran outreach by Pastor Andrew Richard. If you want to help our congregation at St Paul's do a better job of Christian outreach and evangelism in our community, I strongly urge you to read the entire book. It's only 43 pages long. You can download it as a free PDF from steadfastlutherans.org or purchase it as a paperback for $4.79.

The Church seems like a little boat tortured by the waves and threatening to capsize. Yet Jesus has promised in Matthew 16, "I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against her" (Matthew 16:18). As much as the Church may seem to be in decline, she cannot be. The Church *does not decline*. She does not collapse and fall like Jericho. Jesus has firmly established her, and she shall endure eternally, because her life is Christ's eternal life.

Does that mean that each individual congregation is invincible and will never have to close its doors? Not quite. In the Scriptures the Church is pictured in two ways. On the one hand, the Church is like the one ark of Noah: the sole vessel that survived the flood of God's wrath and preserved its passengers. That one ark of the Church shall never be destroyed. By faith in Christ you belong to that one ark of the Church. On the other hand, the Church is also pictured as a fleet of boats. This comes up in Mark 4 just before Jesus calms the storm: "And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him." You don't belong to the Church by sitting on your couch at home, but by belonging to a local congregation. Or in other words, you belong to the one ark of the Church by embarking in one of the boats in Jesus' fleet.

Now, unfortunately, many of these little boats, these individual congregations, have sprung leaks, and the waters of the world's ideals and agendas seep through the wooden floor. Instead of bailing, many congregations enjoy having wet feet. They lay aside the net of the Gospel, let the world's impure salt corrode it, and devote themselves to making bigger leaks: ordaining women, celebrating various sins, turning the Divine Service into an entertainment venue, a house of sale, a den of robbers. When a congregation reaches this point, the world does not rave against it. Such congregations appear to be surrounded by a great calm, with clear skies, with success. And why would the world waste its time trying to capsize such a boat when the sailors are drowning themselves and rising in mutiny against Jesus?

Yet there are other congregations in Jesus' navy, which are not driven by the winds and waves of the world. When the ocean tempests rage, these ships undergird the hull with ropes, face the wind like men, and defy the waves. In the midst of the storm they keep the Gospel net clean of false doctrine and faithfully cast it into the waters. They hoist the sails and mock the gales. The devilish Poseidon waves his trident and hurls curses. And laughing at him, the saints sing a shanty that would entice even the sirens to join them.

These boats are lowly and the faithful are few. Of all the vessels that traverse the surface of the deep, they seem the least likely to survive. The devil does not overlook them because of their small stature; he rather fixates on them because of their faithfulness. He makes the deep boil like a pot. He raises whitecaps and makes the sea like the hoary head of some ancient man.

Make no mistake: the devil is plotting to break up faithful congregations, to make them close their doors. The faithful might not feel his direct attack as a congregation. The ancient serpent is sly as he slithers along the

waterways. He catechizes the schools of fish in his ways, makes the inhabitants of the sea paranoid of nets and allergic to the Gospel. He ensures that scales cover not only their bodies, but also their eyes and their hearts. And the devil lets the faithful go their way, lets them cast their nets in what seems to be vanity. The devil clings, parasitic, to his fishes, holding them back, and he seeks to starve us to death.

But the devil has made a rather silly error in his conniving. We aren't lowering our nets to get fish for our own sake. We proclaim the Gospel to the fish for the fishes' sake, to save them from the satanic Leviathan. Goodness devil, really? You think we're going to float along saying, "We need people in order to survive"? As if we get people in the boat so that we can fillet them, bread them, and serve them with chips?

Dear saints, mark this well: We don't go fishing out of concern for *our* life. We go fishing out of concern for the life of the world. We don't invite people to church so that we can survive. We invite people to church so that they will be saved. Our life isn't in our numbers. Our life is in Christ. That doesn't mean each little boat is going to make it to the farther shore, but there's no reason *you* can't. We sail in a fleet, and other boats are in sight. If our doors must close, then it will be like St. Paul's shipwreck in Acts 27. He said to the sailors, "Take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship."

Whatever happens, nothing can sink the whole fleet, which is to say, nothing can sink the one ark of the Church. By faith in Jesus you belong to that one ark. And that one ark is *Jesus'* ark. He commands the winds and the sea and they must obey him. He is the Jonah who threw himself overboard to give us peace, who turned death's stomach so that all who go in will come out, who came walking back to the boat on the face of the angry waters and is with us.

With such a glorious image before us of the Church sailing on with Christ at her helm, I now ask: what do you have to fear? The world? Let the world do what it will. The Word of the one who created the world still holds sway. But what do you have to fear? Losing your little boat? Christ has other boats, and he will not let you die a castaway. We must not grieve for ourselves in such circumstances. Rather, we weep with Jesus, who says to the city, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not" (Matthew 23:37). Jerusalem may reject the Word of the Lord, but there's always a Nineveh that repents in sackcloth and ashes. The Word may be rejected in a place. A certain zone of the sea may be left unattended by the Gospel net and given over to Satan that the fish may learn not to blaspheme. Christ may take his Gospel elsewhere, but he will not leave you without the Gospel.

So what do you have to fear? The only thing the Church has ever had to fear: offending against her Lord. We dare not get desperate and alter the nets, we dare not look to our own hands and begin letting in water under the pretense of attracting fish. The Gospel catches fish, not our ploys. We occupy ourselves with being faithful sailors, avoiding mutiny, and taking refuge in Christ.

Dear friends in Christ, members of Saint Paul's, may the Lord Jesus make you secure and fearless in these, his wonderful promises. Amen.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Wagner